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ABSTRACT

A study of the effects of recent changes in the United Kingdom's school-exit tests in French language skills, primarily in the new emphasis on communicative competence, compared the perceptions of students in four classes preparing for the traditional test and four classes preparing for the new test. These groups were administered questionnaires asking about the helpfulness of a variety of typical classroom activities and how much time they perceived themselves spending on each activity. The classroom activities included listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities, and student-teacher and student-student interactions. It was found that, in general, students in the traditional-test group did more reading and writing, and students in the new-test group focused more on listening and speaking activities in class. The results suggest that teachers may be using the test format as the instructional method, a mistake made in language teaching in the past. Appended is a list of learning objectives related to listening, conversation, pronunciation, reading, writing, and ways of working.

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THE EFFECTS OF THE NEW FRENCH SYLLABUS ON THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM.

I know that since the introduction of the new programme at Leaving Cert. level in 1983 and of the new Inter. syllabus in Sept. '85 we are all conscious of having made some changes in our approach to the teaching of French. Many teachers had in fact begun to come to terms with what is broadly termed 'the communicative approach' several years before formal changes in syllabus came about. Each of us has his/her own private 'hunches' about whether the classroom strategies required by the new programmes and exams. are better or worse than the old ones. I am quite certain that we could all discuss this topic for much longer than an hour without the need for a stimulus. However, it is my task to provide in fifteen minutes or so some kind of focus for our thoughts.

There are many ways in which I could approach the subject of changes in classroom practice over the past few years: I could speak of my own observation of teachers at work: I could talk about the results of the 'new' exams. in '85 and of the advice the Inspectors offer to teachers based on the patterns emerging from those results. However, any of these approaches would defy a fifteen - minute limit. I have chosen in fact to share with you a very small part of a very unambitious research project on the effect of the new, defined-content Inter. syllabus on the teaching of French in eight classrooms around the country.

I embarked on this project in Sept. '84. I chose from among those willing to participate four classes doing the traditional Inter. in French and four doing the exam. based on the new syllabus in June '85. All eight classes were taking the Inter. after 3 years study of French. Four were in Dublin schools and four in schools in and around a fairly large country town. Two were all-boys' classes, three were all-girls' classes and three were mixed classes. There was a fair range of ability within each class. However, their rating of their language proficiency on the questionnaire which I am about to show you as 28.30% above average, 62.00% average and 9.70% below average probably errs

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on the side of modesty! There were 248 pupils in all, 127 in the control group (i.e. those taking the traditional exam.) and 121 in the experimental group (i.e. those taking the new exam.)

The particular questionnaire which I want to look at with you during this session is one of a battery of questionnaires given to pupils, teachers and parents on various aspects of the teaching and learning of French. It would therefore be unwise to take the figures I will present to you too seriously: they will merely serve to show trends and contrasts between the two sets of pupils. They will serve above all, I hope, to stimulate reaction and discussion on your part. For the format of the questionnaire I am indebted to Dick Allwright of the University of Lancaster who is involved in classroom - based research. As you can see it consists of a list of 27 typical classroom activities grouped under the four skill headings, listening, speaking, reading, writing. The last 3 items are the various ways of working in a classroom, i.e. teacher - pupil interaction, pupil - other pupils interaction and one-to-one pupil-pupil interaction. I ran the questionnaire twice, once to find out how helpful or unhelpful pupils found these various activities, and once to discover how much time they perceived themselves as spending on each activity. On the first run +++ would mean 'I find this activity extremely helpful in my learning of French' and ---- would mean 'I find this activity totally unhelpful' On the second run +++ would mean 'I spend an enormous proportion of class time on this activity' and --- 'I spend hardly any time on activity' In either case the pupil had an option of writing a zero in the margin if the activity was unknown to him or her.

There are obvious limitations in this kind of research. The human element is not taken sufficiently into account: No. 10 'Talking to other pupils in French about something' could mean rehearsing memorised role-plays to one child and could mean more un-structured communication to another. There is also the fact that pupils at that age may not have the capacity to speculate outside their own experience and that consequently 'helpful' may mean only 'helpful as preparation for this particular exam'. It is certainly clear that large numbers of pupils perceive the activities most often done in class as being those most helpful to their task of language-learning!

Bearing all these caveats in mind and fully prepared to entertain others which you may point out to me I shall proceed to share with you a small sample of the vast quantities of data produced for me by the Trinity College Computer. I shall only present the most obvious data in this session.

First of all, taking the four skills globally, i.e. Listening 1-8, Speaking 1-5, Reading 1-8 and Writing 1-6 the following statistics emerge: 93% of those who said they spent no time on listening activities were in the control group and 7% were in the experimental group. At the other end of the spectrum, however, the contrast is less stark: 48% of those who said they spent a very great deal of time on listening were in the control group and 52% in experimental group. Again, 83% of those who said they spent no time on speaking activities were in the control group while 17% were in the experimental group. 34% of those who said they spent an 'awful lot' of class time on speaking were in the control group, 66% in the experimental group. 72% of those who professed to spend no time reading were in the control group, 28% in the experimental group. However, 68% of those who said they spent an 'awful lot' of time on reading were also in the control group and 32% were in the experimental group. (A look at the more detailed analysis of the types of reading done in the respective groups would be necessary for these statistics to mean anything). Surprisingly, of those who said they spent no time on writing activities in class 59% were in control group and 41% in the experimental group. However, 66% of those who spent an 'awful lot' of time on writing were also in the control group with only 34% in the experimental group. These statistics for the most part only confirm our own expectations of what might be happening in the respective types of classroom.

The final section of the questionnaire on ways of working in class yielded the information that 46.4% of those who spent most of their time working as a whole class group interacting with the teacher were in the control group. Only 15% of the control group spent a large or very large proportion of class time working in pairs. This contrasts with 51% of the experimental group who gave 'working in pairs' a ++ or +++ for time spent on it.

To take contrasting activities within the group listed under each skill heading, e.g. L. 4 (Listening to radio) and L.5 (Listening to English explanation of grammar-points', 58.3% of those in the control group

did not spend any class time listening to radio. Considered in terms of helpfulness only 2.4% of this same group considered this activity useful. In the experimental group almost 50% of the pupils considered listening to radio a very helpful activity. This corresponds almost exactly to the percentage (almost 48%) of pupils in the experimental group who considered that they spent a very significant proportion of class time engaging in this activity. Not quite 6% of the control group considered that they spent a great deal of time listening to radio. I think there is possibly a moral here: pupils need to be exposed to an activity in fairly significant doses if they are to perceive it as useful in their learning - process.

In the case of L.5 (Listening to the teacher explaining grammar-points in English) 41.1% of the control group spent a huge proportion of class time on this activity while only 21.1% of the experimental group felt they spent a very great deal of time on it. However, in terms of helpfulness the explanation of grammar-points in English got a very high rating from both groups, 49.5% of the experimental group considered it worth a +++ rating. So did 53.6% of the control group.

Current fears for the fate of the teaching of pronunciation appear to be justified according to this research. S.5 "Doing exercises on the pronunciation of the different sounds of French" gave the following reactions: In the control group only 16% of pupils considered that they did very frequent work on the sounds of French. 33.6% of the control group said that this was an activity with which they were completely unfamiliar. In the experimental group only 4.6% said they never engaged in this activity, while 26.6% said they spent 'a lot' or 'an awful lot' of time on pronunciation work. This is one of the few areas in which pupils' perception of an activity's relative helpfulness is in contrast to their perception of time spent on it. Only 1.8% of the experimental group and 0.8% of the control group considered this a --- activity in terms of helpfulness. 56% of the experimental group give a ++ or +++ rating. So did 19% of the control group.

I could go on with facts and figures ... well, with figures of this kind, at any rate, for a very long time. I feel that what I have presented at this stage will probably suffice to initiate the real business of the session, ie. your comments and questions.

Before I conclude I would like to make one or two non-scientific, global observations on the effects of the new programmes on Classroom practice as I see them. On the positive side I have no doubt that the pupils in our classrooms are rapidly reaching amazing levels of attainment in the skill of listening. The effect of all this exposure to good speech models is already bearing fruit in the area of oral production, especially at junior level. My only negative observation would be some apparent neglect of reading of material of a non-ephemeral kind. My greatest fear, however, is that we are in grave danger of repeating the mistake made in the past, i.e. of using the test format as the classroom method. I have in mind especially cloze-type tests and multiple - choice questions. Both are good tests: neither is a good teaching-tool if used exactly as printed on the examination page. I shall be glad to pursue this in the discussion if you wish.

I would like to thank Dr. David Singleton, CLCS, TCD, who is supervising my research, Jim Larragy of the Department of Computer Science, TCD, who had such endless patience with my lack of computer skills and especially the teachers and pupils who made the research possible.

APPENDIX

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LISTENING						
1. Listening to French being spoken by the teacher/French assistant						
2. Listening to French spoken by classmates						
3. Listening to simple French spoken on tape						
4. Listening to weather-forecasts etc. on tape or radio						
5. Listening to the teacher explaining grammar-points in English						
6. Listening to the teacher explaining grammar-points in French						
7. Listening to the teacher reading aloud in French to the whole class						
8. Listening to other pupils reading aloud in French						
CONVERSATION						
9. Talking to the teacher in French about something						
10. Talking to other pupils in French about something						
PRONUNCIATION						
11. Repeating something in French after the teacher						
12. Repeating something in French after the tape						
13. Doing exercises on the pronunciation of the different sounds of French						

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READING						
14. Reading aloud in French myself						
15. Reading brochures, advertisements, etc. in French in class						
16. Reading a passage of French silently in class						
17. Reading books in French silently in class						
18. Translating a passage of French into English						
19. Answering comprehension questions in English on a passage of French						
20. Answering comprehension questions in French on a passage of French						
21. Reading French as homework						
WRITING						
22. Writing French in class on my own						
23. Writing French in class as one of a pair or group						
24. Writing French for homework						
25. Writing letters in French						
26. Writing essays in French						
27. Writing grammar exercises in French						
WAYS OF WORKING						
28. Teacher speaking to the whole class together in English or French						
29. Working in groups of 3-5						
30. Working in pairs						